

Mourning Dove Management in Alabama

Alabama Guide Sheet No. AL 645D



Every year hunters harvest more than 50 million doves from a population of over 500 million in the United States. Annually, Alabama hunters take between 2.5 to 3.5 million birds. Many landowners use dove hunting as an extra source of income during the year through the sale of shooting rights. Dove hunting generates a significant amount of money for research and wildlife management through the sale of licenses, firearms and ammunition. No other game bird matches the mourning dove's widespread distribution. Doves are one of the few game birds that can be successfully managed under intensive farm practices. Suitable habitat can be retained, created or maintained on cropland, hayland, or pastureland. Land managed for doves should be protected from erosion and produce an abundance of high quality food.

Habitat Needs

Food

Doves are almost exclusively seed eaters. Nearly all of their food source comes from agricultural crops or native grasses and weeds associated with open land. These seeds must be available on clean, open ground. The birds also need grit or gravel to grind and digest hard seed coats. Choice foods are browntop millet, corn, dove proso millet, sunflower, and wheat.

Water

Doves need free sources of drinking water daily. These are primarily puddles, ponds, and streams with clear edges.

Cover

Mourning doves usually build nests in trees, preferring those with fairly large horizontal limbs. Nest sites are best located along the edges of fields and pastures

and should offer protection from weather and nest predators. Evergreens are preferred for roosting.

Creating Habitat

Dove Fields

The most common objective of mourning dove management is to attract large numbers of birds for shooting purposes during the hunting season. This is best accomplished by ensuring that grain is left available during all times of the year. Dove fields should supply an abundance of high quality food. Fields should be at least 2 acres in size, although 5 to 10 acres are usually recommended. A good rule is to plant an acre for each hunter. More food may be available by burning parts of fields where residue or litter is heavy and moisture is low. Utilize certified burning personnel to develop a burn plan. Prior to conducting a prescribed burn, obtain a burn permit from the Alabama Forestry Commission. Burning can cause damage to property and loss of human life when improperly conducted. Follow all applicable state and local laws and regulations.

To reduce the chance of erosion, choose sites that are level or have conservation practices installed. Plant fields in browntop millet, dove proso millet, grain sorghum, corn, sesame, or sunflower. Planting portions of fields in different grains and varying the planting dates will attract doves early and hold them through the hunting season. Mowing portions of wheat fields that were planted the previous year may also provide seed during the summer.

Early Season Fields

Early season fields provide shooting from September to October. These fields should be planted in browntop millet, dove proso millet, or sunflower. Browntop millet

is recommended to be planted with dove proso millet or sunflower. The seed must fall on bare ground or it will not be found by doves. Browntop and dove proso millet may be planted in rows or broadcast. Rows are recommended and may be continuous or skip. Continuous rows should be 36-42 inches apart and grasses and weeds must be controlled between the rows. Sunflower seed is also a choice dove food. It may be planted in continuous rows spaced 36-42 inches apart or in skip rows. To provide food during nesting season or concentrate birds before the early fall season, a stand of wheat should be established. Mow one-third, but no more than two acres, of a wheat field in June after the seed is fully mature.

Late Season Fields

Cornfields that have been harvested provide late season shooting opportunities from November to January. These fields may have been planted in corn or grain sorghum. A high yielding, hard seeded corn variety is best. Select a hybrid that is not susceptible to viruses. Generally, late maturing hybrids are best. Plant corn in rows 30-40 inches apart, with the seed spaced 10-12 inches apart in the rows. Grain sorghum is faster maturing than corn and more resistant to drought. It can also be planted in broadcast stands. Select a variety that produces loose heads and is resistant to common insects and disease. Grain sorghum may be planted in rows or broadcast. Rows should be spaced 30-40 inches apart. Many hunters prefer skip rows because downed birds are easier to find.

Guidelines for Dove Hunting

This document is for guidance purposes only. Anyone managing a site where hunting will take place should

check all state and federal laws pertaining to the taking of game birds.

According to US Fish and Wildlife Service, effective July 6, 1999, the following regulations should be noted:

1. The current regulation prohibits taking of migratory game birds by the aid of baiting, or on or over any baited area, if the person knows or reasonably should know that the area is a baited area. In addition, it is now a separate offense to place or direct the placement of bait on or adjacent to an area for the purpose of causing, inducing or allowing any person to take or attempt to take any migratory game bird by the aid of baiting on or over the baited area.
2. A current distinction is made between agricultural practices allowed for waterfowl, cranes and coots and practices allowed for other migratory game birds such as doves and pigeons. The hunting of any migratory bird including waterfowl, cranes and coots is allowed over lands where either a *normal agricultural planting, harvesting and post-harvesting manipulation* or *normal soil stabilization* has occurred. The hunting of migratory game birds, except waterfowl, cranes and coots is allowed over a *normal agricultural operation*. Agricultural practices must be conducted in accordance with official recommendations of State Extension Specialists of the Cooperative Extension Service.
3. Hunting of any migratory game bird, including doves, is allowed over lands planted by means of top sowing or aerial seeding if seeds are present solely as the result of a *normal agricultural planting* or a *normal soil stabilization* practice.

CROP	SEEDING RATE/ACRE	PLANTING DATES		
		North	Central	South
Browntop Millet	25 lbs. broadcast, 10 lbs. rows	May1-Aug. 1	April 1- Aug. 15	April 1-Aug. 15
Corn	7-10 lbs. rows	April 1-May10	March 20- April 20	March 1- April 10
Sunflower	8-10 lbs. rows	April 1- July 15	April 1- July 15	April 1- July 15
Dove Proso Millet	25 lbs. broadcast	May 1- Aug. 1	April 1- Aug. 15	April 1- Aug. 15
Wheat	60-90 lbs.	Aug. 25- Oct. 1	Sept. 1- Oct. 15	Sept. 15- Nov. 1

4. Hunting is allowed of any migratory bird over manipulated natural vegetation without any restrictions. This rule excludes planted millet from the term natural vegetation. Millet that grows on its own in subsequent years is considered natural vegetation that can be manipulated at any time without restriction.
5. Hunting over grains that are inadvertently scattered from standing or flooded standing crops solely as the result of a hunter entering or exiting a hunting area, placing decoys or retrieving downed birds is allowed.
6. The take of migratory birds from a blind or other place of concealment camouflaged with natural vegetation is allowed as well as using agricultural crops for the purpose of concealment or camouflage as long as the use of such does not result in the exposing, depositing or scattering of grain or other feed.

Definition of Terms

Normal agricultural planting, harvesting or post harvesting manipulation means a planting or harvesting undertaken for the purpose of producing and gathering a crop, or manipulation after such harvest and removal of grain, that is conducted in accordance with official recommendations of State Extension Specialists of Cooperative Extension Service.

Normal agricultural operation means a normal agricultural planting, harvesting, post-harvesting manipulation or agricultural practice, that is conducted in accordance with official recommendations of State Extension Specialists of Cooperative Extension Service.

Normal soil stabilization practice means a planting for agricultural soil erosion control or post-mining land reclamation conducted in accordance with official recommendations of State Extension Specialists of Cooperative Extension Service.

Baited area means any area on which salt, grain or other feed has been placed, exposed, deposited,

distributed, or scattered, if that salt, grain or other feed could serve as a lure or attraction for migratory game birds to, on or over areas where hunters are attempting to take them. Any such area will remain a baited area for ten days following the complete removal of all such salt, grain, or other feed.

Baiting means the direct or indirect placing, exposing, depositing, distributing or scattering of salt, grain or other feed that could serve as a lure or attraction for migratory game birds to, on, or over any area where hunters are attempting to take them.

Manipulation means the alteration of natural vegetation or agricultural crops by activities that include but are not limited to mowing, shredding, disking, rolling, chopping, trampling, flattening, burning, or herbicide treatments. The term manipulation does not include the distributing or scattering of grain, seed, or other feed after removal from or storage on the field where grown.

Natural vegetation means any non-agricultural, native, or naturalized plant species that grows at a site in response to planting or from existing seeds or other propagules. The term natural vegetation does not include planted millet. However, planted millet that grows on its own in subsequent years after the year of planting is considered natural vegetation.

References

Alabama Game and Fish Division. Frequently Requested Information: Planting Guidelines for Dove: <http://www.dcnr.state.al.us/agfd/faq.html>

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US Fish and Wildlife Service, Department of the Interior. Migratory Bird Hunting: Regulations Regarding Baiting and Baited Areas. Federal Register 64: 29799-20804.

Waters, R.E. Some Things You Should Know About Wildlife In Alabama. Alabama Forestry Planning Committee.

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